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The need to internationalize our organizing for East Timor

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This paper attempts to encourage discussion and debate around how to better coordinate our work internationally. Indonesian President Suharto has been organizing internationally for years, and has recently stepped up his efforts. Suharto is reacting to our successes — not the other way around — and we need to keep it that way.

In Canada, where grassroots pressure on both the Indonesian and Canadian governments has significantly increased in the past few years, Suharto has invested considerable time and money trying to change public opinion. Most of these efforts have backfired, leaving a trail of reporters ever more committed to pushing stories on East Timor into the news. Around the world, Suharto has easily spent more on public relations aimed at countering the effects of the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize than the winners themselves received.

Despite the Indonesian government's access to wealth and other resources, we are winning this long and slow struggle, and we may be able to speed it up by finding ways to better coordinate our efforts internationally. In this paper I put forward several proposals — knowing this conference will be attended by many people far more experienced and knowledgeable than I — hoping to spark debate and dialogue on how to move in this direction.

Quick response organizing:

We need a single, trusted source to quickly provide accurate information and suggest appropriate actions as reports of atrocities make their way out of East Timor.

The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Bishop Belo and José Ramos Horta has lent the movement more credibility. In Canada, as a result of this important international victory, there is more demand on ETAN to be able to quickly provide accurate information about current events in East Timor. It is crucial now that our short term responses (and our policies on domestic and international events which impact on East Timor) be consistent with the views of internationally recognized East Timorese figures like Bishop Belo and Horta.

This kind of international coordination was badly needed following recent reports of alleged guerilla attacks against "civilians" in East Timor. In Canada, CBC national radio news carried the story before we had news on the e-mail conferences. Then, as reports, news releases, and "urgent actions" trickled on-line, they all varied tremendously in analysis and facts. It was very difficult to

move quickly and with confidence to reverse the media's spin.

It would be useful to have one source which could be e-mailed, faxed or telephoned for information, or even better, which could e-mail or fax out information to a list of organizations around the world, in addition to posting it on "reg.east timor," as significant events unfold inside East Timor.

This one source could also gather and distribute news about follow-up actions being taken by organizations around the world, to lend strength and momentum to each group's work. One obvious solution is to have one e-mail conference for news, and one "controlled access" e-mail conference for action reports and requests (bearing in mind the limits of internet security). However, recognizing that not all organizations have easy access to electronic communication, it would be necessary for this one source to also operate using other means of communication.

International actions for East Timor

In addition to international quick response organizing, internationally organized "days of action" for East Timor help make our work on dates like July 17, November 12, and December 7 more effective. Although some of this exists already, to my knowledge no forum has been set up which carries out some basic helpful steps:

- Initiate discussion about the upcoming action date, at least two months before it arrives;
- Circulate the previous years ideas and actions, including news releases, and post-event evaluations if they are available;
- Solicit and distribute proposals for actions from groups around the world, especially from East Timorese activists and leaders;
- Work to provide a quote about the occasion from Bishop Belo or José Ramos Horta for use in media work;
- Ensure that news releases and other action announcements are gathered and distributed to as many groups as possible;

- Solicit and distribute post-event evaluations and media coverage from participating organizations.

A timely example illustrates the value of this type of coordination. Leading up to July 17 this year, our Ottawa chapter of the East Timor Alert Network — Canada, was considering options for an action. In the past we had held large demonstrations in front of the Indonesian embassy, with a lot of success, but which required a lot of work. At a planning meeting, one member suggested picketing and leafleting in front of the Canadian Department of Defence to raise awareness about Canada-Indonesia discussions on increased military ties and training. For various reasons, we decided against this idea.

On July 14, I logged onto "reg.east timor," only to see that the East Timor Independence Committee in New Zealand would be picketing their own defence headquarters to protest military training for Indonesia on July 17. I saw this as a missed opportunity — two groups pondering the same kind of action could have exchanged useful ideas, and urged other countries to join. The advantages would be endless — it would make our actions more "newsworthy" with both local and international relevance; it would be motivating to know we are part of something larger; and it would be useful to share ideas about tactics and strategies.

Charlie Scheiner and John Miller from the East Timor Action Network in the United States have recently noted the bitter-sweet success of halting the sale of F-16 fighter jets from the U.S. To Indonesia, only to have other countries step up with a "no-principle policy" on arms sales to Indonesia. A single action/information exchange and distribution point would be beneficial, so, for example, when Suharto goes on an international shopping spree for fighter jets and military training, he is greeted by international outrage.

Internationalizing solidarity campaigns:

There is also a need to coordinate and encourage the sharing of information around organizing for support for East Timor in specific sectors, such as labour, academia, and media.

In many sectors, such as labour, organizing for support requires learning an entirely different culture — and then finding ways to demonstrate how supporting East Timor benefits their

membership. This type of work and learning takes time, but the lessons learned can be shared both within countries, and across borders.

In 1995 ETAN/Canada set up the "National Solidarity Project," — essentially a coordinated effort to make East Timor a priority on the agendas of trade unions and other established progressive organizations in Canada. This work resulted in a strong resolution in support of East Timor passed at the 1996 Canadian Labour Congress convention, as well as the participation of several trade union leaders in letter-writing campaigns and even demonstrations. Having leaders representing over 2 million workers calling for an arms embargo against Indonesia, in letters to the Prime Minister and in the media, added strength to our demand.

Trade union solidarity has also directly benefitted Bella Galhos, an exiled East Timorese activist in Canada. Funds raised through our trade union work went directly into a paid internship for her at ETAN's national office, for example. In addition, Bella has participated in several trade union political education programmes, both as a speaker and as a participant. One example is the Women in Leadership Development programme offered by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers.

In the near future, we hope to encourage trade unions to support Bella's work in Canada in a stable, long-term way. Much more could be done with more time and resources, but the lessons we have learned so far with this campaign should be shared with other countries. In Canada we have received requests for information on our work with trade unions from other countries, but there needs to be a more formal structure in place to ensure that valuable lessons and strategies for campaigns like these are distributed.

Sharing research and strategies:

Every social movement needs to conduct research in order to make sound decisions around strategy and tactics. However, thorough research requires time and resources, which many of our organizations do not have. For example, the internet is a wonderful tool for researching, but so few people have access to this resource. Ideally, this work can be shared by having a number of organizations' representatives decide priorities for research, and then share the work and distribute the findings. Perhaps a research e-mail conference could be set up for those with access.

Research into conditions and events inside East Timor is difficult but badly needed. For example,

in Canada, the government has responded to letters from trade union leaders by boasting about its funding for projects inside East Timor. We need to know who these projects are benefitting in order to decide whether to protest or support these projects, and we need to be able to inform our allies about our position.

Research into the Indonesian government's public relations strategies and spending would also be very useful. Some of our most successful tactics in Canada have been turning Indonesian government public relations events to our advantage. Being able to predict events, describe the international context, and quote statistics about public relations spending would be very useful.

Once we have shared our research, we need to coordinate and consult on strategy. We need a forum to discuss international and national organizing strategies to ensure each of our demands and goals complements work done in other countries and in international fora. Campaigns which target corporations, particularly multi-nationals, for example, would benefit from shared research and strategies. All of this would be particularly useful along with more guidance from the East Timorese leadership.

Unintentional inconsistencies can be particularly harmful to maintaining our own legitimacy both with our supporters, and with our own government. In Canada, for example, we have lobbied against aid projects in East Timor, only to have our position contradicted by the CNRM leaders in meetings with the government.

What exists already?

So little has been compiled in any useful fashion about the incredible international solidarity movement which has grown in support of East Timor. A compendium of organizations would be a useful start. Imagine how useful it would be to have a constantly updated guide to the movement in each country! Compiling and distributing information about the international movement itself would help activists and organizations better understand the movement as a whole, and better recognize its setbacks and successes.

There are organizations and mechanisms which already exist which could be strengthened to help with international coordination of our organizing work. The National Council of Maubere Resistance (CNRM); the International Federation for East Timor (IFET); Parliamentarians for East

Timor (PET); electronic mail lists and conferences; and international conferences like this one.

We need to ensure that people are attending conferences like this as delegates with a commitment to share their experience with their organizations. The internet and electronic mail conferences are wonderful, for those who have access, but a mechanism is needed to ensure that organizations without internet and electronic mail access have alternative ways of accessing the same information resources (It would be interesting to know what percentage of exiled East Timorese have access to the internet and electronic mail).

We need to examine existing international organizations to see if they could play some of the needed roles, and in addition we may need to develop new mechanisms.

Conclusion:

The international movement in support of self-determination for East Timor is not a smattering of exceptional, rare, protest events on the fringe of mainstream society in various countries — despite how it is portrayed by the media and the Indonesian government and its allies. It is strong, and growing. The more we can develop a sense of this within our own ranks, by coordinating our work internationally, the stronger this movement will grow.

International law is on the side of East Timor — now international effort is needed to make the law stick. American political scientist George Lakey describes the shift from organizing and coordinating work on a national or local level, to an international level: "The task remains community organization, but the communities are those which transcend national boundaries." (George Lakey, *Powerful Peacemaking: A Strategy for a Living Revolution*, (Philadelphia: New Society, 1987) p 99.

This is key — "the task remains community organization." In our respective organizations, many of us work hard to coordinate local efforts so that nationally, our work is more effective. In doing so we soon learn to respect local organizations' autonomy, just as we respect the autonomy of individuals working within our local groups. We learn to work for democratic structures and process, both locally and nationally, understanding that involving more people in the decision making and planning will build a stronger movement. The same principles of democratic organizing need to be applied to any international coordination of our work.